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SUBJECT: SYRIANS REACT NEGATIVELY TO ENHANCED TSA SCREENING REQUIREMENTS

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter, Reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Syrians of all stripes have reacted negatively to enhanced airport screening requirements for travelers from 14 countries, including Syria, recently instituted by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA). Government officials, students, journalists, businesspeople, and other Embassy contacts have expressed concern the new regulations will deter Syrians from traveling to the U.S. Syrian contacts said they have become used to the enhanced screening that comes with their country's being listed as a state sponsor of terrorism since 1979. However, Syrians who travel frequently to the U.S. expressed frustration at Syria's being added to an additional list given what they claim is a good track record of Syrian travelers to the U.S. Despite criticism of the enhanced screening requirements as "discriminatory" and "a form of humiliation," Syrians continue to apply for U.S. visas at the usual rates. END SUMMARY.

"THIS IS HUMILIATION"

¶2. (C) Vice Foreign Minister Faisal al-Miqdad raised the issue of enhanced airport screening requirements for 14 countries, including Syria, recently instituted by the TSA during a meeting with CDA on January 9. Miqdad called the new requirements "discrimination" and "humiliation" for Syrians wishing to travel to the U.S. "For our people this is an immoral policy from a religious viewpoint because it is wrong to say terrorists come from just these 14 countries," he stated.

¶3. (C) Miqdad predicted the new screening requirements would dissuade Syrians from traveling to the U.S. "If you do this, no Syrian will go to the U.S. and we will torture you at our airports if you come here," he declared. (NOTE: Miqdad has previously taken umbrage at U.S. airport screening procedures, blocking visas last fall for Department of Homeland Security personnel coming to interview Iraqi refugees for possible resettlement, in reaction to his treatment at Dulles Airport in September. End note.) Miqdad added the enhanced screening requirements "undermine the morale of the people" and increase anti-U.S. sentiment.

"EVERYONE IS TALKING ABOUT IT"

¶4. (C) Syrians from a broad swath of socio-economic backgrounds have also criticized the enhanced screening requirements since their announcement last week. "This is a big issue for Syrians these days. My sister had a difficult time at the airport the last time she went to the U.S., and she might not want to go back if the screening is going to be even tougher," Mohammad Agha, who works for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), said. "I didn't really feel comfortable telling people I was from Syria the last time I was in the U.S., and programs like these are why," reported businesswoman Rasha Ayoub-Agha. Her friend Jida, who works for the United Nations High Commissioner for

Refugees (UNHCR), agreed, adding "all of our friends are talking about this new announcement."

¶15. (C) Students hoping to study in the U.S. also expressed concern about being singled out while traveling to American cities. Damascus University student Hussein Chalhoun reported many of his friends, especially young men, have cited the enhanced screening requirements as a reason to pursue study in France or Canada instead. "There is already a feeling that there is some discrimination against Arabs in the U.S. because of September 11, and so something like this makes it harder to get the courage to go there," he said. Omar Kahwaji, a masters student, criticized the measures as discriminatory. "If the measures were applied on everybody it would be kind of reasonable. But applying them on holders of (only) certain nationalities is not acceptable."

¶16. (C) Businessman Abdul Ghani Attar, who runs the popular Damascino Mall, questioned why Syria was added to the list when other Arab and Muslim countries were left off. "Look at Jordan, they are not on the list even though they have terrorists. One of them just bombed a CIA base in Afghanistan," he said. His father, Syrian Arab Red Crescent President Abdul Rahman Attar, argued Syria had established its anti-terrorist credentials and did not deserve to be on the new list. "We have been fighting terrorism for years," Attar said, referring to the late President Hafez Asad's campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s.

¶17. (C) Muhammad Lahham, Manager of Syriatel, also criticized the new measures as "unfair." "We (Muslims) must not be taken as terrorists only because one crazy man tried to blow

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up an airplane. The new measures are unfair and humiliating," he added. Davidoff sales representative Maher Sheikh Khaled questioned whether Americans would accept similar treatment at Syrian airports. "Would the U.S. accept that we apply the same measures on Americans at our airports? Of course they won't."

SYRIAN MEDIA LASHES OUT AT NEW MEASURES

¶18. (U) Syrian media was swift in its criticism of the enhanced screening measures. The official "Tishreen" daily declared: "Again, the United States is placing its national security above all legal, international, and ethical standards. It is imposing upon the Muslim world a set of sudden, random, and harsh measures." The official "al-Baath" daily opined: "It is unacceptable that the U.S. restricts the tighter and abusive monitoring to passengers coming from 14 countries she solely alleges to be sponsoring terrorism. It is especially unacceptable as the current administration had claimed that it would adopt dialogue with both its friends and foes." Presidential Political and Media Advisor Bouthaina Shaaban attacked the new screening requirements in a January 11 editorial criticizing "measures against millions of travelers who will be the subject of humiliation at U.S. airports."

¶19. (U) Other pieces have specifically criticized the inclusion of Syria among the 14 countries on the enhanced screening list. In an editorial in the privately-owned "al-Watan" daily, a writer compared the list to a "blacklist" and concluded "it is hard to find a reason why certain countries like Cuba and Syria are on it." In a "Tishreen" editorial entitled "Humiliation May be With You," the newspaper noted Syrians "fully condemn terrorist crimes, from which we in Syria have long suffered." The writer opined "targeting certain countries and subjecting their citizens to discriminatory measures is useless because terrorists would recruit holders of other nationalities. If these measures do not work, then maybe we will be forced to travel in tightly locked steel cages."

¶10. (C) COMMENT: Syrians have long been used to heightened

screening at airports due to their country's inclusion on the list of state sponsors of terrorism since 1979. It remains to be seen whether Syrians critical of the new enhanced screening measures will actually change their U.S. travel plans. The consular section reports the rate of visa appointments is normal and the section is still filling 60 appointments per day two weeks in advance. But the reaction among Syrians - both within the SARG and among private citizens - has been swift and strongly negative. The enhanced screening measures will likely contribute to the belief among many Syrians that they are unfairly singled out when they travel to the U.S., not due to the number of terrorists coming from Syria but because of politics. END COMMENT.

HUNTER